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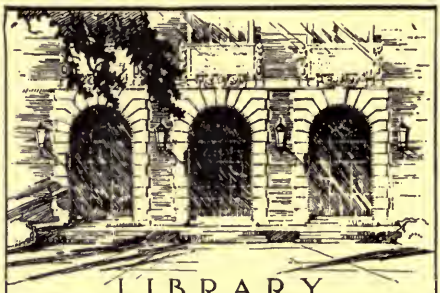
THE BEGINNING OF GRAND OPERA IN CHICAGO



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ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

THE BEGINNING OF GRAND OPERA IN CHICAGO

The Beginning of
GRAND OPERA
in Chicago
(1850-1859)

by

Karleton Hackett

CHICAGO
THE LAURENTIAN PUBLISHERS
1913

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To My Wife

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FOREWORD

'Opera' has always been a word with which to appeal to the children of men; moreover it has been my experience that whatever interested me —I being an average man—would prove interesting to my fellows. Therefore, when I discovered that the first attempt to produce opera in Chicago was brought to a close by the burning of the theatre, it occurred to me that it ought to be entertaining to learn something of the facts in the case, if they were to be unearthed at this late day. In digging about among the soot-begrimed files of the newspapers of the time there was brought to the surface a wealth of material so amusing in itself, with so many sidelights as to how people felt in the 'fifties, that I ventured the conclusion that it would be amusing to others.

To those who like to draw up an easy chair under the lamp—if near an open fire, with a gentle rain outside, so much the better—light a

pipe, and quietly muse over the things that were, this little record is modestly offered in the hope that it may afford an agreeable half hour. The gathering of the material was for me a pleasure, and I shall feel doubly repaid should it prove entertaining to the courteous and discriminating reader—how easily one falls into the polite formalities of the olden time!

KARLETON HACKETT.

THE BEGINNING OF GRAND OPERA IN CHICAGO

THE first performance of opera in Chicago took place on the evening of Monday, July 29th, 1850, in "The Chicago Theatre," the season coming to a close the following night, during the second performance, because of a destructive fire which consumed the theatre and half a block of buildings besides.

What sort of a theatre did Chicago boast in those days, and in what kind of a town was it housed? Here is the description of a contemporary observer, printed in the Chicago *Journal*, Saturday, June 26th, 1847:

The New Theatre

"The internal arrangements of the New Theatre, now nearly completed, are admirable. A full view of the stage can be obtained from every part of the house, and the plan of the old Coliseum has been followed in this respect. The boxes are elegantly furnished and fitted with carpets and settees, rather resembling a boudoir or a private sitting room in a gentleman's house,

than an apartment in a place of public resort. Altogether the building is tasteful and commodious.

"Little did the immortal Will forsee,* while a strolling player he performed in some barn in 'Merrie England,' that away at the farther extremity of Lake Michigan, in the new world, a temple would have so soon been erected to his favorite muse, erected, too, thus substantially, and finished thus beautifully within the space of six weeks; but there it stands, the striking exponent of Western industry and enterprise.

"Much as individual opinions may conflict, relative to the theatre, its utility and influence, yet the most scrupulous must admit that as such establishments must and will exist and be countenanced in this world of ours, it is highly desirable that they be as chastened and elevated and true to nature as possible. In this point of view a new era is unquestionably dawning in the theatrical world in this city."

**The manifest errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation which occur in the various quotations from the newspapers of the period are copied literally.*

No matter how many times we may experience the same phenomenon in the history of human endeavor, yet each time it strikes us anew with undiminished force—the impossibility of getting back to the beginnings of things. Here was this town of something over twenty thousand inhabitants, just finishing the first building expressly constructed for a theatre, yet already spoken of as "The New Theatre," and hailed as ushering in the dawn of a new era in the theatrical world of the city! If this was the "New Theatre," when, it may be inquired, were its outworn predecessors built? That, however, is outside the field of the present discussion, for my labors are limited to a record of our operatic activities, and this particular theatre was the scene of the first performance of opera in Chicago. With some regret, therefore, I find myself obliged to leave to our antiquaries of the dramatic stage the task of tracing the habitat of the first theatre in Chicago to its original lair amid the prehistoric bogs and mists.

What a grateful thing it would have been if the gentlemen of the daily press of Chicago in

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the 'forties, in place of permitting their muse to soar unrestrained through the magnificence of architectural design and lavish decoration, had confined her within the bounds of definite figures —a truth which we of this generation might well take home to ourselves. Then it would much more easily have been discovered that this "New Theatre," the advent of which meant so much to the town, was located in the second story of a wooden frame building measuring eighty feet in length by forty in width, and situated on the south side of Randolph Street, midway of the block between Clark and Dearborn Streets. This temple of art was contracted for by Mr J. B. Rice, the proprietor and manager, on the sixth of May, 1847, and thrown open to the public on the twenty-eighth day of the following June, having consumed something less than two months in building. No wonder the 'Chicago spirit,' then as enterprising as now, permitted itself to indulge in a modest boast over the achievement. Also we are permitted, by implication, an enlightening glimpse of the probable condition of the theatrical world and

of the structures in which it had previously found its abiding places, since this new home of Thespis was welcomed with such enthusiasm.

For our information concerning the facts herein set down, I have turned exclusively to the files of the press of the time, that we might get the news 'fresh and fresh,' just as it came onto the streets every afternoon for our great-grandfathers—also for the additional reason, quite sufficient in itself, that there was no other place to get it. The daily newspaper, when you live with it day after day, takes on as distinct a personality, one drawing you by its cheery helpfulness and the other repelling by its chilling reserve, as the men you meet around the lunch table. The *Journal* was a wide-awake sheet, giving all sorts of entertaining tidbits of the happenings about town, somewhat fearful of the tendencies of the opera and theatre, dubious of their possible effect on public morals, yet performing well its function as a news-gatherer. The *Democrat* treated things in a much superior manner, having smaller space for local doings,

while the events of the Eastern centers and the reports from Europe bulked pretty large.

From the *Journal* we learn that "lamp-posts to burn gas are being set up"; that "owners of cattle are informed that Dearborn Park [the land where the Chicago Public Library now stands] is now thrown open to ruminating animals. Those who get there first will get the best grazing"; of an "aggitation for the closing of State Street stores at eight o'clock"; that "thirty-four green and Italian marble mantels have just arrived for the decoration of the Tremont House"; also that "the floor of the grand hall and office are to be of marble." In reply to the Milwaukee *Sentinel*, which had hinted at some padding of the census figures, the *Journal* retorts: "From the returns of the Marshal thus far, we are lead to believe that the census of Chicago [of 1850] will show a population of over 28,000. If our contemporary wears a 'seedy' hat, and wishes to take the chances for a better, he can test our 'over-estimate.'" We sought in vain to discover

whether the *Sentinel* took up the glove—or rather, the hat.

So, when an opera company appeared on the horizon, the *Journal* gave some advance notices to aid the people in forming their judgments, though without committing the paper too far in the matter: "This Troupe have won golden opinions from the public and the press. We have before us now a half score of notices, which, considering whence they came, leave not a shadow of doubt as to the rare skill of Miss Brienti and Mr. Manvers in the devine art of song. We bespeak for them a multitudinous welcome."

A few days later, on July 27th, 1850, the *Journal* had the following:

OPERA TROUPE

"Mr. Rice, ever ready to minister to the tastes of the public, has effected an engagement with an Opera Troupe of acknowledged reputation, who will make their first appearance on Monday evening. Among them are Mr. Manvers and Miss Brienti, names already familiar to many

of our readers. This is a new feat in theatrical entertainments, and one which should meet with distinguished favor."

The *Democrat* of July 29th stated that "Mr. Rice's Opera Troupe have arrived from Milwaukee and will appear this evening in 'La Sonnambula'"—short, but to the point.

There was not much coddling of song birds in those days: the company made the trip from Milwaukee by sailing vessel, taking the fortunes of the winds and waves as they came, and prepared to sing the very day of their arrival, regardless of what the voyage might have done to their internal economy.

In those days it was apparently the universal custom not to insert a regular advertisement in the newspapers until the day of the first performance, the accidents of travel having possibly given ample demonstration of the inadvisability of anticipating the event. The first official announcement of a performance of opera in Chicago was thus printed in both the *Journal* and the *Democrat:*

MONDAY JULY 29th, 1850

THEATRE

N. B. Clark, Stage Manager

ENGAGEMENT OF THE OPERA TROUPE

MISS ELIZA BRIENTI

MR. MANVERS

MR. GUIBEL

On Monday evening, July 29th, will be enacted

"LA SONNAMBULA"

Count Rudolph.....Mr. Guibel

Elvino.....Mr. Manvers

Amina.....Miss Eliza Brienti

Concludes with a Pas de Deux Mr. & Mrs. Cilbert

Admission to boxes fifty cents—Pit twenty-five cents.

Doors open at 7. Curtain rises at 8 o'clock.

The *Journal* of the following day wrote that "An excellent house welcomed the Opera Troupe to the Chicago boards last evening and 'La Somnambula' was performed as announced. [It appeared to be impossible for the Chicago newspaper to accept the Italian spelling of "La Sonnambula."] Whatever may be the taste of the theatre-going public in this city with regard to Operas, all must conceed that the music was

of a high order, and executed with admirable grace and skill. Miss Brienti's face is eloquent in her favor, to begin with, and her voice, now as soft as a vesper bell, now wild and shrill as a clarion, doubles and completes the charm. Messrs. Manvers and Guibel both possess voices of tone, power and cultivation, and with Miss Brienti and Miss Mathews make melody and harmony that Apollo would not hesitate to accompany upon his ocean-tuned harp."

The *Democrat*, issued on the same day, had not one word to say about the performance, though one might have imagined that the first production of a grand opera in the city of Chicago would have been considered by the managing editor worth a passing comment, if only to condemn the entire proceeding. However, that it may be recalled to our minds once again how the essentials of human character remain constant throughout the ages, and that the exploits of the 'yellow journal' of to-day existed in embryo in the times of our ancestors, it ought to be noted that the same issue of the *Democrat* found space for consider-

ably more than a column of small print to devote to the details of the "Lawrence Divorce Case," continued from the day before, and to be resumed on the morrow. There was also reprinted from a Paris despatch an article on the Black Prima Donna, just discovered, who was to rival Jenny Lind, and a couple of days later a fine, big one all about the "Poor Girl and the Rich Manufacturer, Most Interesting Case before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania." That the moral standard of this molder of public opinion in matters of art might be established beyond the peradventure of a doubt, in a long dissertation concerning the then famous statue of "The Greek Slave," occurred this final judgment: "After all it is only a *nude female figure cut in stone.*" (The italics are copied from the original.)

A few years ago, the whole civilized world was torn in sunder over the controversy as to whether the twentieth century began on the first day of January, 1900 or 1901, yet this great question had already been settled above a half a century before by the Chicago *Journal.*

The fact was noted that the birthday of Millard Fillmore fell in the year 1800, which was held to be conclusive proof that the year 1800 was the final year of the eighteenth century and not the first of the nineteenth, since Fillmore had undoubtedly nothing in common with the nineteenth but was a relic left over from the previous century—yet we of the year 1900 proudly felt that we were the first to discover this recondite problem over which to vex our heads!

On the evening of July 30th, the opera troupe gave their second performance of "La Sonnambula," and the season was brought to a close by the burning of the theatre during the second act.

The *Democrat* awoke to say that "One of the most destructive fires which has taken place in this city for some time occurred last night. Before subdued by the firemen it destroyed over twenty buildings, including the Chicago Theatre — half a block in one of the most thickly populated portions of the city. It broke out in the stable owned by Mr. Kelley on Dearborn Street,

between Randolph and Clark, about 10 o'clock last night. In a few minutes everything was a mass of flames and the fire communicated to the theatre adjoining. The audience, which fortunately was not very large, was alarmed, but Mr. Rice, with much presence of mind, restrained them, and thus enabled all to leave the building without endangering each other by a rush."

But it was the *Journal* which rose to the occasion, with the true journalistic instinct for news value and dramatic interest:

"Owing to the combustible nature of the materials the theatre was soon enveloped in flames. The curtain, the side scenes, and most of the private wardrobe of the company, was saved, but the properties, furniture, and fixtures were all destroyed. The loss falls heavily on Mr. Rice, the estimable proprietor and conductor of the theatre. He had an insurance of only one thousand dollars, while seven thousand dollars will not make good the destruction.

"Mr. McVicker, who with his wife occupied rooms in Mr. Gurley's building, was compelled to make a 'flying leap,' losing property to the value of two hundred dollars, and of a nature difficult to replace.

"The streets were completely strewn with household furniture, Saloon fixtures, and fragments of the wreck of the theatre, and what with the crowds of people filling the sidewalks, and clustered upon the roofs, and at every window, the hoarse call of the speaking trumpet, the foliage lighted up with strange tints, and the sky of a deeper blackness, the huge volumes of smoke, skirted with crimson, and rolling into the glowing abyss, and church spires rising glittering into the night, while it might have been a scene an artist would love to catch and stay upon canvas, yet it was eloquent of destruction and alarm."

There appears to be almost a modest challenge in these words, as though the writer were projecting his psyche into the dim future, defying the modern reportorial race to better his best,

and calling attention to the fact that not once was he driven to the use of 'lurid.' Also the historic plaint is voiced: "As has heretofore been experienced, the Fire Department labored to disadvantage for want of sufficient length of hose and suitable Hooks and Ladders."

In the midst of the fire news there appeared a notice which ought to be inserted to the credit of the people of those days, even though it bore little fruit, and the problem remains to this moment no nearer solution:

Vocal Music

"At the meeting of the School Inspectors and Trustees on Tuesday evening last, the following resolution was passed:

"Resolved: that the teachers now employed to teach music in the public schools be, and are hereby, instructed to teach 45 minutes immediately after recess, and 45 minutes before the close of school in the afternoon in the lower department of each school twice a week; and that music be taught on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, and that they teach as

far as practical the theory in connection with the practise of music.

"We trust that the day is not far distant when music and exercises in composition will be as much a part of everyday business in our primary schools as penmanship or orthography."

Our progress since that day appears to amount to about this, that while we are no nearer an intelligent teaching of music in the public schools, we have quite lost penmanship and orthography.

When do you suppose this time-honored jest first saw the light? "At the fire a lady carried out a huge set of andirons, while some one threw a pitcher out of the window."

Mr Rice was held in such esteem by his fellow-citizens, in spite of the fact that he was the manager of the theatre, to which sentiment they afterwards testified by electing him mayor of the city, that on the day after the fire a number of prominent gentlemen sent him the following open letter:

CHICAGO, JULY 31, 1850

J. B. RICE, ESQ.

Dear Sir: In view of the serious loss you have sustained by the burning of the theatre last evening, and not more as a tribute to your success as a manager, than to your merit as a man, we desire to extend to you a Benefit Concert, at as early a period as you may see fit to designate.

Assuring you that we but speak the sentiment of the whole theatre-going public, as well as of those who have the pleasure of knowing you personally as a private citizen, we are,

Respectfully Your Friends,

Then follow the signatures of four hundred citizens.

To this Mr Rice replied the same day:

Gentlemen: I have just received your note, being an offer of your patronage to a concert for my benefit. I accept it with pride, and beg to assure you that I appreciate the kindness that has suggested it.

Yours Respectfully,

J. B. RICE.

The opera troupe all volunteered their services for this Benefit Concert, then under the management of Mr McVicker and Mr Archer, gave a few performances in the near by towns to recoup their losses, and quietly evaporated from the scene. The first performance of opera in Chicago had become a thing of the past, save for this echo in the *Journal*, of August 2d:

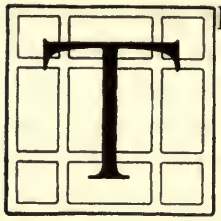
"An amusing incident occured the other evening at the burning of the theatre, related as a fact by a gentleman of responsibility who was an actor in the scene. Mr. B——, and a small party of his English friends, who had been dining out, concluded to patronize the opera on that evening, and Mr. B——, whose rotundity was considerably better filled with sparkle than the rest, had taken a front seat, and was saluting the song and sentiment of the occasion at every wait with 'unbounded applause,' by clapping his hands and vociferating 'Bravo, bravo!' bravely.

"Presently, like an electric shock, came the cry of 'fire!' The audience started suddenly for

the doorway, though their retreat was checked by Mr. Rice, the manager, who was on the stage at the moment. Then all was confusion, and each member of the company, in endeavoring to save the properties, et cetera, of the profession, was rushing backwards and forwards in every direction across the stage.

"Meanwhile our friends outside had missed their comrade, and thinking perhaps that he might have been injured, one of them stepped up into the boxes just as the fire was bursting through the end of the building, and Mr. Rice crossing the stage with a side scene on each shoulder. *There sat Mr. B——, solitary and alone in the front seat, in perfect ecstacies at the performance, shouting, 'Bravo, bravo! A most stupendous imitation of a fire! Bravo! Bravo!'*

"B—— has not said *opera* since."



HE *Democrat* of August 2d, two days after the fire, announced: "Nothing daunted by the destruction of his theatre, Mr. Rice was up and doing early this morning, making arrangements for the construction of a NewTheatre, of much larger dimensions, on the site of the old one. We understand it will be of brick." Has the 'Chicago spirit' of our own day shown anything more courageous, better typifying our belief in the future of our city, than this act of Mr Rice?

From the *Journal* of October 29th, we cull the following:

NEW THEATRE

"This fine structure is rapidly approaching completion and is planned after the most approved models for such buildings. Being one hundred feet in length, it gives ample 'scope and verge' for those who 'strut their brief hour upon the stage.' There will be three tiers of boxes, a Saloon, etc., etc. If the work progresses as

begun, Mr. Rice will open about the First of January."

It would be a great pleasure for us if we knew the name of the gentleman who took care of the theatrical department of the *Journal*, for we have conceived a warm affection for him. Whoever he may have been, he evidently had a sincere love for the theatre, was something of a Shakespearean scholar — which fact he displayed with delightful naivete — and though heredity and environment caused occasional doubts to assail him, yet he stood fast to his colors, ever ready to help when he could. So once again on January 29th, 1851:

THE THEATRE

"The interior of this beautiful edifice is receiving the finishing touches. The scenery grows apace. Mountains rise, plains stretch away, palace turrets gleam, and forests rise as magically as 'Birnam Wood came to Duncinane.' It is to be opened Monday next."

Then we come upon these announcements:

CHICAGO, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3D, 1851

CHICAGO THEATRE

OPENING NIGHT

The undersigned respectfully announces to the public that this *New* and *Splendid* establishment is now completed and will be opened for the season Monday, February 3. It is lighted with Gas, and has seats for *fourteen hundred persons*. The company is full and efficient. The orchestra (composed of 1st class musicians) is complete.

J. B. RICE, Proprietor and Manager.

Star Spangled Banner.....sung by all the company.
Opening address.....spoken by Mrs. Rice
Love in Humble Life.....Mr. Hann
Mr. McVicker
Mrs. Rice
Nautical Song, "The Sea"..... Mr. Archer
Redowa Polka.....Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert
New Vaudeville....."The Captain of the Watch"
Two popular overtures.....by the Orchestra
Farce.....Dumb Bell

Boxes fifty cents; gallery twenty-five cents; gallery for colored persons twenty-five cents.

FEBRUARY 6TH

THEATRE SALOON

A neat and very spacious saloon with fixtures and apurtenances *a la mode*, has been opened in the part of the theatre building arranged for that purpose, wherein Mr. George Baxter does the honors and the amiable.

So the drama was once more on its feet in Chicago, housed in a building that cost eleven thousand dollars, lighted with gas, and with a seating capacity for fourteen hundred people, but it was over two years before Mr Rice ventured on presenting another opera company.

In the *Journal* of October 24th, 1853, appeared this card:

"The undersigned, acting in the name and on behalf of Mme. de Vries and Signor L. Arditi, (known by the name and style of the Artists Association) has the honor of calling the attention of the musical community and of the citizens of Chicago in general, to the fact that he

has made an arrangement with Mr. Rice, the manager, to have the Italian Opera Troupe for two nights next week at the Chicago Theatre, to perform the opera in Three Acts, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the *chef d'ouvre* of Donizetti, and the grand masterpiece of Bellini, *Norma*.

"The undersigned respectfully begs leave to introduce to the citizens of Chicago in general the following unrivalled artists, who were received with the utmost enthusiasm and unbounded applause by the public of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Richmond, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis:

Prima Donna.....Signorina R. de Vries
Tenor.....Signor Pozzolini
Baritone.....Signor Toffanelli
Basso.....Signor Colletti

"The public will find that every department is complete as well for the number as for the excellence of the performers.

"A very effective chorus of ladies and gentlemen — the best in the United States of America and desirable even in Europe.

"The orchestra is composed of solo per-

formers, and all professors of the highest standing — over 40 in number, the whole under the magic direction of the most distinguished master and composer, Sig. L. Arditi, of European fame, and well known as one of the greatest living composers.

"The undersigned feels confident that the citizens of Chicago will appreciate his efforts to produce before them an Italian Opera on a scale unrivalled, and that they will bestow upon them liberally their favors.

SIG. POLIANI."

With this announcement Chicago was formally introduced to grand opera. With this announcement the standard was established, and since that day, barring certain changes in the outward verbal dress, each succeeding season of opera has been ushered in with a fidelity to the formula here laid down, as though it were the dogma of orthodoxy. Always each new season has proclaimed itself as being projected on a 'scale unrivalled,' with the very foundation stones of the edifice formed of the

names of European celebrities. With us since the beginning it has been 'the greatest in the world,' or it has been nothing. That little touch about the chorus, 'the best in the United States and desirable even in Europe,' has never been surpassed by the most supercilious of imported press-agents, and still remains a mark to shoot at.

This was just sixty years ago, which means that practically no man now living can remember the time when his opera was not brought to him from abroad, and depended for its standing upon the reputation which the artists had gained in Europe. For this reason it is small wonder that the words, 'Grand Opera' and 'Italian Opera' became synonymous in the minds of the people. This feeling grew up because this fact was back of it, which truth we might as well accept whether it altogether pleases our vanity or not, since it is squarely in the middle of the path with no way of getting around it. Things which actually exist always have some stubborn fact on which to rest, and our development does not come from belittling this or that, or

seeking to blink them all out of sight when they become inconvenient, but through frankly recognizing the truth and adjusting ourselves thereunto with the best goodwill that our strength will admit.

No apology is offered for the American public, for its growth during the last two generations in the appreciation of music, nor for the manner in which it has recognized the powers of the American artists, since none is needed. We Americans have had a long road to travel in arriving at a love for the arts, and it is everlastingly to our credit that we found the road so soon, and have already tramped past so many mile-posts. We are a young people who have had many immediately pressing problems demanding settlement, but give us time, and the capacity we have manifested in the practicalities of life will bear as rich fruits when we can turn our creative energies to the arts.

Just try to imagine that "Lucia" was once a burning novelty coming to a first performance in Chicago with this cast, about which discussion was as ardent as anything we have had since:

Lucia.....Signorina Rose de Vries
Edgardo.....Signor Pozzolini
Lord Ashton.....Signor Toftanelli
Lord Arthur.....Signor Baratini
Raimondo.....Signor Condi
Admission to boxes and dress circle two dollars—no extra charge for securing seats. Private boxes ten dollars and thirteen dollars. Parquette secured seats one dollar and a half; not secured at night one dollar, gallery fifty cents.

So here is another fable of the olden times gone a-glimmering, for we have always heard how in the times gone by the prices were such that 'everybody could go to the opera'; yet here we have the proof in cold type that in 1853 opera was proportionally at least as expensive as it is to-day. For the opening of the theatre, only a short time before, the scale of prices was fifty cents and twenty-five cents, while for the opera it was raised to four times that amount. Nowadays the standard theatres charge two dollars and the opera has risen to five dollars. Mr Rice's new brick theatre, lighted with gas, cost him to build something

like eleven thousand dollars, and if he filled all of his fourteen hundred seats at the prevailing prices for dramatic performances we could make a rough guess that his receipts must have been in the neighborhood of five hundred dollars — counting six hundred seats at fifty cents, and eight hundred at twenty-five cents. We have no way of knowing how the proportions were distributed, but this seems fair, and by this calculation the rate of interest which Mr Rice received on his investment of eleven thousand dollars was certainly as high as the manager of to-day obtains from the present scale of prices, since his investment is in proportion much larger. Mr Rice spent eleven thousand dollars for his theatre and charged fifty cents, but we would like to know the name of the theatre in Chicago to-day charging two dollars which could be built for four times eleven thousand dollars.

The increased cost of living has hit all alike with an impartial hand, and from grand opera in 1853 at two dollars, to grand opera in 1913 at five dollars, the decision would be rather in

favor of 1913, as not showing such a rate of increase as might have been expected. Grand opera costs money — always has as far back as there is any record, and doubtless always will, at least so long as any of us now alive shall have personal interest in the subject.

That we may not lose from sight the consciousness of how little change there is in general principles, let us ruminate over this little note from the *Journal* of October 26th: "Stone flagging is being laid in front of the Court House, and it promises to be an improvement over the board piles, with their ups and downs, whose place it takes. For the most part, the city sidewalks are in a very miserable condition, and strangers particularly in noticing it invariably ask, 'What kind of a common council have you?' "

In those days music criticism contented itself with the glittering generalities, as though conscious of treading on unfamiliar ground, and yet, with the quick intelligence of the American amid strange surroundings, always proposing to 'play it safe,' like the young man

at his first big dinner, who avoided handling any of the multitude of instruments spread out before him, until he had observed which ones were employed by those more habituated. Here is a sample of early criticism in Chicago:

"The performance of last evening drew forth the most enthusiastic plaudits. Mme de Vries fully met the expectations raised by the high encomiums passed upon her by the press of other cities, while Pozzolini and Toftanelli sang with great sweetness and beauty. To-night the troupe appear for the last time in the city in the great opera of 'Norma,' the announcement of which is alone sufficient to draw out all who have musical taste in the city to hear it."

The house was so full for the performance of "Norma," and the public so well pleased, that the company decided to remain over until the following Monday, to give "La Sonnambula," "by a galaxy of talent which should draw out all who have music in their souls."

The next day the theatre was given over to "Acting Monkeys, dogs, and goats," with the best seats raised to seventy-five cents, giving us the disturbing impression that even in those days at times the animal theatre brought higher prices than the legitimate drama.

Once in so often, in fact with a considerable degree of regularity, we of to-day set up a tremendous howl over the exorbitant demands of the artists of the opera, as though this were altogether a phenomenon of modern times — yet listen to the *Journal* of 1853: "Tamberlick refused an offer from the grand opera in Paris of one hundred and forty-five thousand francs per annum — as he was already receiving that sum. Gorti of the 'Italiens,' is to pay Mario and Grisi one hundred and fifty thousand francs for the season, payment of all expenses, and forty-five thousand francs for the forfeiture of their American engagements."

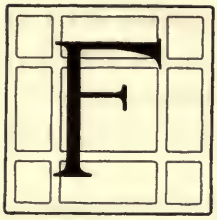
This would not look so very bad to-day with this difference; that wherever the original contract read 'francs,' the modern press-agent would translate it into 'dollars,' in

which orthodox form it would be distinctly impressive. Yet leaving the figures just as they stood, many of our famous singers of to-day would be quite content with such an honorarium for the short winter season in Paris; and, whether the sums mentioned were actually received in coin of the realm, the people of Chicago thought so, which is the important point.

It is impossible to get back to the beginning of 'the high salary crime,' and certainly in the days to which we are referring now, the United States was not the offending party. If necessary this same 'crime' could be traced back to a period when America no more thought of importing opera than of bringing icebergs fresh from the north pole, having neither the money nor the inclination. There is no evidence that in proportion to the purchasing power of money, the singers of to-day receive a cent more than their prototypes of two centuries ago. At this day they are to be found in greater number, and the artists of the second rank are vastly better off; but Farinelli in the eighteenth century fared as well in worldly goods as Caruso

in the twentieth, so far as we can judge from the figures handed down. In all the ages, the artists who won the goodwill of the public have been richly rewarded, and so far as we ourselves are personally concerned, there appears no sufficient reason why, if those who supply the means of food and raiment are to be recompensed by admission into the sacred ranks of the multi-millionaires, the artists who minister to our higher wants should not be deemed equally worthy; and we never yet heard of an artist who became a multi-millionaire.

Returning to our operatic mutton, it may be added that with the performance of "La Sonnambula" the second season of opera in Chicago ended, leaving an impress on the minds of the people which established Italian opera and Italian singers as supreme in the world of opera. This original bent given our forefathers, has had a determining effect in our attitude toward the art which still shapes our thoughts at this present moment, a stubborn fact which is not to be denied.



IVE years passed before another season of opera was attempted in Chicago. Meanwhile, Mr Rice had retired from the scene, his place being taken by Mr McVicker, who had built a theatre which apparently was a theatre in the modern sense of the word, and which through all the vicissitudes of the town has kept his name a power in the theatrical world until this day. Chicago had now become a town of ninety-eight thousand inhabitants, and the new theatre had cost in the neighborhood of eighty-five thousand dollars—giving the croakers of that day a fine text for a preachment on the increased cost of living.

In September, 1858, it was announced that arrangements had been made with "The New Orleans English Opera Troupe" for a season of grand opera in English—and the great question of opera in the vernacular was brought upon the tapis, where it has remained until this hour, an unsolved problem. Unfortunately, precisely at this same time, the famous basso

Karl Formes, then touring the country with an operatic concert company, was due in Chicago, and the difference in the reception accorded him and that awaiting the English opera company was painful.

Of all titles for an English opera company to bear, that of "New Orleans" was the most unexpected, nor is any light to be obtained on the subject by a careful scanning of the preliminary announcements. The standard, however, was established by the scale of prices—boxes at five dollars, the best seats seventy-five cents, with two galleries at twenty-five cents each, one for the whites and one for the colored people.

Even in those days, the burning question in opera was evidently the tenor, and this company settled the matter by having Miss Georgia Hodson sing all the tenor rôles, which could hardly have been an entirely satisfactory solution. The opening performance was on Monday, September 27th, 1858, with "La Sonnambula" again chosen for the first night, to be sung by this cast:

Count Rudolph.....Mr. F. Lystar
Elvino.....Miss Georgia Hodson
Amina.....Miss Rosalie Durand
Allessia.....Mr. F. Trevor
Lisa.....Miss A. King

The critic of the *Journal* had grown with the town, and by now was feeling quite free to express his opinion in matters musical. Of the opening performance he wrote: "Take it all in all, the performance of this beautiful opera, as compared with other performances of this same piece that we have seen, was quite ordinary, in a strict artistic point of view. But the audience was very well satisfied, and that is the principle point after all."

The bill for the week was: Tuesday, Donizetti's "Daughter of the Regiment"; Wednesday, Auber's "Crown Diamonds"; Thursday, Rossini's "Barber of Seville"; Friday, for Miss Hodson's Benefit, Balfe's "Bohemian Girl," Miss Hodson singing *Thaddeus;* and to complete a week's work, which would make the artist of to-day flee the profession in terror, Auber's "Fra Diavolo," with Miss Hodson as the *Fra.*

Quite apart from any question of artistic powers, we find ourselves compelled to take off our hat to Miss Hodson and Miss Durand for their courage in attempting such a feat, and for the physical prowess which enabled them to carry it through to the end—also we are unfeignedly glad that it was not our lot to sit through every performance. On the following Monday they entered upon another week's work, refreshed, we will hope, by one day of rest, with a "Cinderella," though by whom composed is beyond us to state. That same day the paper announced that "The sale of seats for Karl Formes begins to-morrow. Prices one dollar and fifty cents, and one dollar.

"This is the largest and most experienced opera troupe that has ever visited us," the announcement adds, "and to hear the orchestra alone is worth the price of admission, composed as it is of some of the first performers of New York." This statement concerning the orchestra has more than passing interest for the people of Chicago, since the company carried three conductors, C. Anschutz, C. Bergman, and Theodore Thomas.

Tuesday "Cinderella" was repeated, and the paper stated that there was a great rush for seats for the Karl Formes concert. For Wednesday was announced: "First time in Chicago of the master-piece of Karl Maria von Weber, the immortal 'Der Freischuetz.'" Thursday "Der Freischuetz" was repeated, and the company received a little boost, of which doubtless the need was dire: "Positively the last night but two of the New Orleans Opera Company, who have been received nightly with rapturous applause and every demonstration of delight."

The same paper notified the people of Chicago that Karl Formes would arrive in the course of the day, and be serenaded in the evening at the Tremont House by the united musical societies. Now if the undue prominence of the operatic artist be altogether a phenomenon of the present day, the result of the sensationalism of the modern newspaper, and inspired by that particular devil who presides over the affairs of America, how can such an occurrence as this just noted be accounted for? For, lo! these many years, we ourselves

have had a fair working knowledge of the doings of the musical world of Chicago, and no such thing has come to pass in our time; yet away back in the staid old days of our uncorrupted ancestors, this was not only possible, but actually happened.

Thursday, for the benefit of Miss Durand, Verdi's "Il Trovatore" was first given in Chicago, with Miss Durand as *Leonora*, and Miss Hodson as *Manrico*. The critic of the *Journal* wrote before the performance: "This opera has been played with great success in New York and other cities, and is no doubt one of the greatest performances, if well executed, that graces the modern stage. The attractive character of the piece, and the beauty and vocal merits of the beneficiary, ought to be a sufficient guarantee for a crowded house."

In this comment, no great perspicacity is required to discover the hand of the press-agent. The critic of the *Journal* had by now served his apprenticeship, and was no longer to be caught with chaff, nor was he averse to giving the people a taste of his quality when

the proper occasion presented itself. These, too, were the days of the 'slashing article,' which the old-timers lament, together with the passing of the 'three bottle men,' and of the superior beings who 'always took their liquor straight,' and the other heroes of antiquity. He writes:

"We listened in vain for something which might remind us of our old favorite. To be sure the anvils seemed natural, and the orchestra played something which sounded like the anvil chorus, but otherwise 'Il Trovatore' was shrieked, screamed, groaned, and killed. The whole performance was below mediocrity. The properties were miserable, the action tame, the music inharmonious, false and discordant. 'Il Trovatore' is far beyond the capabilities of the troupe, and we trust that they will not again allow the charge of murder to rest upon them."

And once more, though with all due modesty, we would like to know if modern education has enabled his successors in the field of criticism to do their devoir better.

While "Il Trovatore," then in the vigor of his valiant youth, was being butchered to make a Chicago holiday, the streets before the Tremont House were jammed with people to assist at the serenade of Karl Formes. The united societies sang, Formes listening, like a monarch, from the balcony; he then addressed a few words in German to his admirers (we wonder would it be possible to guess their general purport) and retired "amid the cheers and plaudits of the crowd."

Nothing much changes in this world save the shaping of the outer garb, which but varies in accordance with the exigencies of fashion, and the rapacity of dressmakers and tailors. Formes had a good press-agent; the people were interested in hearing about him; and the following story has not been badly beaten by the ingenuity of the modern publicity man:

"Formes will sing to-night the great song of the Standard Bearer, which he once sang with tremendous effect upon the field of battle. When his countrymen wavered Formes seized

the banner and, with Lindpainter's song finding utterance in his majestic tones, he led them on to victory."

The unfortunate New Orleans English Opera Company had, after another performance of the "Bohemian Girl," apparently evaporated from the scene, leaving Formes to rule alone.

In the year 1859 there were three visits by opera companies, with so many performances as to make the season present something of the aspect of our most flourishing modern times, and with names which have not yet lost their power over the old guard. The opening performance was on Tuesday, February 22d, with Donizetti's "Lucrezia Borgia," and the prices at one dollar, and fifty cents. This was the cast:

Lucrezia.....Teresa Parodi
Maffio Orsini.....Amelia Strakosch
Genaro.....Sig. Brignoli
Duke Alfonzo.....Sig. Junka
Gubetta.....Sig. Nicola
Director, Maurice Strakosch

The attitude of the press had by now become so sophisticated, as befitted the public prints of a metropolis, that it would quite have lost its distinctive quality, were it not for the saving grace of producing somewhat the effect of a *tour de force,* written by a man who had rather learned the proper thing to say, than a spontaneous expression of actual feeling:

"We have never seen a more brilliant audience in Chicago, and to-day we have but a kaleidoscopic remembrance of it. It was an *olla podrida* of rigolettos, opera-glasses, musk, bouquets, frangipannis, alabaster shoulders, small talk, moustaches, diamonds, valenciennes, and crinolines of St. Paul-domelike extension. An air of social intercourse usurped the place of the dull theatrical atmosphere, and upon the rising of the curtain the audience had talked themselves into the requisite state of good nature to be charmed with the peerless Parodi and the brilliant Brignoli."

The company gave "La Traviata," "Lucia,"

"I Puritani," "Rigoletto," "Il Trovatore," "Martha," "Norma," "La Sonnambula," "Favorita," and "Don Giovanni," "Mozart's immortal and greatest of all operas, produced with a cast which has never been excelled in any opera house in Europe, New York, Boston, or Philadelphia."

Away back in the 'fifties came the plaint which has since been echoing down the corridors of time to this very day, and as yet without an answer: "The orchestra played too loud." Time after time have we seen people fairly boiling over with rage at the state of things which made it impossible for them to hear the famous artists, for the sake of whom they had just spent such sums at the box-office, because of the thunderous crashing of the orchestra; lamenting, the while, the halcyon days of their youth, when the orchestra was kept in its proper place, thereby enabling the public to enjoy the singing that had cost them so dear. Yet here again are we confronted with proof in undeniable form, that the problems of humanity, whether in art or life, are perennial, always

were in the state of being wrestled with, are to-day the same, and with no prospect of radical amelioration in the immediate future. Those who preach to us with such fervor of 'the good old times,' are somewhat prone to dwell in recollection only on the pleasant places, brushing all else aside as though it had never been — procedure which is hardly fair, and which considerably detracts from the value of their testimony.

There was, too, thus early voiced the plaintive query: "Why can't the prompter be more quiet, and not interfere with the music?" This question, without doubt, was propounded to the Sphinx, in those prehistoric days when her entire form rose clear from the now enshrouding sands, and certainly has been repeated by each generation of opera-goers, of which record has been preserved. The office of the prompter, one of that wondrous race of beings the carrying power of whose voices is one of the mysteries of laryngeal conformation, is one of the great arcana of art, somewhat as the appendix is one of the arcana of the

body. Not that we would for an instant suggest that the functions of prompter and appendix are in any way to be compared, for the merest hint of a suggestion to do away with the prompter causes the same consternation in an opera company, that the words 'rate regulation' cause in a railroad office. The prompter is as essential to the proper ordering of an opera company, as was the *memento mori* of a grinning skull to the Roman feast, serving to remind us all, distinguished artists and entranced listeners alike, that we are but frail beings of an hour, and that no human thing can be without the flaw of our common mortality.

The opera season was evidently a success, possibly a little too much so for what the critic of the *Journal* considered the artistic well-being of Chicago; and he therefore felt it incumbent on him to point out the weaknesses of opera, as an art form, that the people of this city might not be led astray, nor their budding perceptions bent awry. These attacks on opera began with the earliest essays in the art, and will undoubtedly continue until that time in the

dim future, when the opera shall have ceased to be—say a matter of ten or a dozen centuries hence; but this particular one, as the first published in Chicago, and evidently conceived with sincerity, merits especial attention. It shows how from the very first the beauty of the combined arts, whether in strict accord with all the canons of the unities or not, took a powerful grip on the imagination of the public, a fact which has been constant in all times and places, regardless of the denunciation and jeers of those superior beings who have arrogated to themselves the congenial task of telling the public how it should lead its life. We quote his remonstrance:

"Those Italian singing birds which have been hibernating with us a brief three weeks have warbled their last notes and flown—flown with the good wishes of some and the dollars of all. We must now return from ambrosial nights with the choral Bellini, the profound Mozart, the thundering Verdi, and the delicious Flotow, to the more legitimate delights of

Thespis and Melpomene—more legitimate because these goddesses must look down with surprise at the funny paradox of singing the drama; of the wicked *Don Juan* coaxing away the enticing *Zerlina* in chromatics; *Zerlina* responding in flats and sharps at the top of her voice, and *Masetto*, the foolish lover, remonstrating in hemisemidemi quavers—the whole enveloped in an atmosphere of fiddles, drums, and trumpets, as though people made love, and maids were won, in that manner.

"And with the birds we must bid good-bye to little delicate flirtations, charming white, red, and orange cloaks; feathertipped fans and fleecy hoods.

"And thus while we bid good-bye to the delicious Colson, the bewitching Strakosch, stubborn Parodi, splendid Junka, and frigid, lady-killing Brignoli, we wonder if we must fall back into the old beaten track of dullness and ennui? To be sure we must atone during lent for witnessing 'Traviata,' 'Trovatore,' and 'Don Juan,' with their lax morals not altogether covered up by the divine music of the

masters. But then we shall do that by much fasting, and then revert to the theatrical, the legitimate drama, the depictor of nature and the true teacher when we rightly learn its lessons. We trust that the gaudy gilding of the opera will not outshine the sober, severe coloring of the drama. We hope that the opera with its fashionable toilets has not removed the love of the dramatic. The one pleases the sensuous, the other the intellectual; which shall predominate? The high spiced esculents will do now and then, but they hurt the digestion; the plain, every-day dish administers to our nutriment.

"Thus while we are thrilled and enchanted by the divine music of the masters, let us no less be thrilled with the divine conceptions of the masters who have swept the strings of the mightiest of instruments, the human heart. Let us give the drama that support and encouragement which shall raise it to its true position, the teacher of the people."

When was the cry first raised that 'The drama must be elevated'? When did the censors

of our morals first begin to lament the undue prominence given 'that false and hybrid art, the opera'? We despair of finding the answer. Opera, as an art form, has weaknesses which he who runs may read, but it has strengths which all the denunciations heaped upon it by those with vocabularies that were boundless treasuries of invective have never been able to shake. A thing has power not because of its weaknesses, but because of its strengths; and the appeal of music, wedded to the drama, has had a beauty for the children of men which may not be gainsaid. The strengths have more than overbalanced the weaknesses, and it remains to-day, as it has been for the last two centuries, that form of music with the widest appeal for the great mass of the people. Things which endure are founded on some truth of human experience, and the aspiration of the human heart for that which shall minister to the life of the spirit has found aliment in the opera to stir the deepest emotions.

What care we, amid the grinding toil of daily existence, whether the pictures of art

square with every detail of actual life so long as they stimulate our perceptions to a richer consciousness? So, in the first outreachings of the Chicago of the 'fifties toward the light, there was in embryo all that has come with the fruition of the metropolis; for we are, indeed, but the children of our parents, with like aspirations and like infirmities. To us the spirit of early Chicago is bracing, a spur to us of this day to do our work while it is yet time.

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